

Field Trip!

by **Jennifer Melick** :: [no comments](#) | [Leave a comment!](#)

When's the last time you went to a concert where the average age in the audience was twelve?

Last week, I—along with 800 elementary and intermediate public school students—went to [LaGuardia High School of Music, Art, and the Performing Arts](#) for a daytime performance of Purcell's short opera *Dido and Aeneas*. This was a commission by the [Orchestra of St. Luke's](#), which was joined by professional soloists, as well as the senior chorus from the high school, and it was a collaboration with [Jody Oberfelder Dance Projects](#). Dancers occupied center stage, soloists and orchestra were stage right, and the chorus stood stage left. Each character in the opera had a dancer double who acted out the story, as projections were shown that added the contemporary twist—"Words Are Everything!"—of an ill-fated tabloid couple. It was well done, and it deserved [the nice review it received in the *New York Times* last Saturday](#).

At 10:30 a.m. on a Wednesday, this auditorium was bursting with energy from kids thrilled to be sprung from their classrooms. So it was nonstop noise noise noise while the orchestra tuned up and kids jockeyed for position to sit next to their friends, as teachers cherry-picked suspected troublemakers from the center seats and placed them near adults at the ends of rows. Though there was quite a bit of talking and fidgeting and playing with electronic devices, the plus was a complete absence of the stifling, churchlike atmosphere sometimes in evidence at evening concerts. (Or just the pure exhaustion of adults worn out from a day's work.) The kids' reactions were honest and immediately apparent. If they didn't like something or were bored, they got restless. When the dancers pulled off athletic moves—as when the dancer who played Dido, standing on other dancers' shoulders, dropped backward in a freefall into other dancers' arms—the kids all went "Oooooooh." When the choreography incorporated a few humorous butt pats, they giggled, as kids will do. And when they liked the musical numbers, they clapped—loudly and lustily. They were clearly impressed by the gymnastics moves such as handsprings, and by the dangerous-looking lifts. "Two years ago," says Liz Norman, director of education for St. Luke's Orchestra, "another teacher choreographed *Pulcinella*, and they had kids standing on their heads. The boys especially loved that."

The high school students in the LaGuardia chorus who sang in this *Dido and Aeneas*, says choir director John Russell, are the role models for the younger kids in the audience. When a performance like this is done for public school children, Russell feels that they've succeeded "if there's one kid that we turn on to this music, whether it's to downloading something different from iTunes, going to a concert, or trying an instrument." His students include [Neera Islam, the senior who is heard singing "Dove sei, amato bene" from Handel's *Rodelinda*](#).

Neera Islam sang in the *Dido and Aeneas* chorus last week, and she is one of the school's success stories. But success, in Russell's view, doesn't consist only in going onto a career in music. (Three years ago, LaGuardia's valedictorian, a vocal student named Lily Kass, opted to go to Harvard rather than a conservatory.) For one thing, he says, out of a senior class with about 110 vocal performance majors, only about 20, or maybe 30 students at most, are specifically interested in classical vocal music. "We have some of the best kids here—the talent level is so outstanding. It's hard sometimes to keep the kids centered and moving in the right direction. Before they come here, a lot of them have only had exposure to the kind of music you see on MTV or *American Idol*. Then they come here in the vocal program and they start off singing Italian art song in ninth grade. Some go enthusiastically in that direction and connect with it right away, others come to it slowly, and others decide that type of music is not for them."

After that daytime *Dido and Aeneas* performance, the auditorium had to be emptied out immediately to make space for the next performance. The kids lined up to get back on buses and subways to go back to their classrooms. Those kids will spend most of their schooldays learning math, English, social studies, and science, and later that night after they get home, lots of them will watch *American Idol* as usual. But a few renegades—after hearing the Purcell's one-hour opera—just might be eagerly awaiting an opportunity to learn to sing "With drooping wings" or learn some new dance moves.